PORTRAITS OF ENGAGEMENT
A Pat Brown Institute Polling Program Brief

PAT BROWN INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS
Unleashing the Power of Participation

Jewish Voters in Los Angeles County: Current Views on Israel

Alisa Belinkoff Katz
Fellow
UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy

About the PBI Polling Program

The Pat Brown Institute's pathbreaking Polling Program project explores the civic engagement as well as the political and social orientation of four major racial and ethnic groups in Los Angeles County: African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Jews. The Latino and Asian-American surveys were conducted in 2016 while the Jewish and African-American surveys were conducted in 2019. The findings from these four surveys are intended to generate and inform community and scholarly conversations. More information about the program is available at

www.calstatela.patbrowninstitute.org



The American Jewish community has long identified with and supported the State of Israel. Synagogues, religious schools, and summer camps promote Israel education and awareness. Jewish organizations advocate for Israel, lead trips to Israel, and raise funds for Israeli causes. For decades, Israel has been central to the identity of the American Jewish community, and American Jews have been fundamental to the security of the Jewish state.

This report explores attitudes toward Israel among Jewish voters in Los Angeles County, as revealed by a recent survey conducted by the Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs at Cal State LA. The PBI 2019 Los Angeles County Jewish Voter Survey posed specific questions about the importance of Israel as a Jewish state, Israeli government policies, and the significance of Israel to American Jewish identity. As such, it offers much-needed nuance and insight into attitudes towards Israel. The survey was conducted by the public opinion research firm EVITARUS and its Partner and Principal Researcher, Shakari Byerly. With 1,812 respondents, the survey is one of the largest local studies of Jewish voters in recent years and the first public opinion study of the Los Angeles Jewish community in over two decades. The large sample size allows for detailed subgroup analysis by age, political ideology, gender, and other key variables.[1]

1 The PBI survey was conducted from August 7, 2019 to September 19, 2019. 93% of the respondents were reached online; 7% were reached via telephone. The margin of error was +2.30% at the 95% confidence level. Data are weighted.

With over half a million Jewish residents, Los Angeles is home to the world's fourth largest Jewish community after Tel Aviv, New York City, and Jerusalem. While characterized by great demographic, denominational, and political diversity, the survey indicated that the vast majority of Jewish voters in Los Angeles supported and identified with Israel. Indeed, almost three-fourths of Los Angeles County's Jewish voters thought that it was important for Israel to exist as a Jewish state. An even higher proportion (86%) identified as "generally pro-Israel." However, two-thirds of survey respondents were critical of some or many of the Israeli government's policies. Views on Israel were polarized along denominational and ideological lines. Jews with a lower level of "Jewish identity" were notably less attached to Israel. Finally, the survey showed that younger Jewish voters, in comparison to their older counterparts, were less supportive of the Jewish state.

I. Attachment Towards Israel

The PBI survey asked respondents, "How important is it to you that Israel exist as a Jewish state?" The response was overwhelming: 73% of all survey respondents thought it was important that Israel exist as a Jewish state, including 56% who found it very important and 17% who found it somewhat important. Only 21% said it was not important that Israel exist as a Jewish state (Figure 1).

A majority of Jewish voters from a wide variety of demographic subgroups agreed with this proposition. This included young and old, registered Democrats and registered Republicans, regular religious service attendees and secular Jews. It included college graduates and non-college graduates, Jews with high incomes and Jews with low incomes, Jews who immigrated to the United States and Jews who are native born. Support for the existence of Israel as a Jewish state ran deep and wide.

However, some voters expressed this view more strongly than others. Registered Republicans and those who defined their politics as conservative showed more support than Democrats or self-identified liberals (Figure 2). Orthodox and

Figure 1.
Importance of Israel as a Jewish State

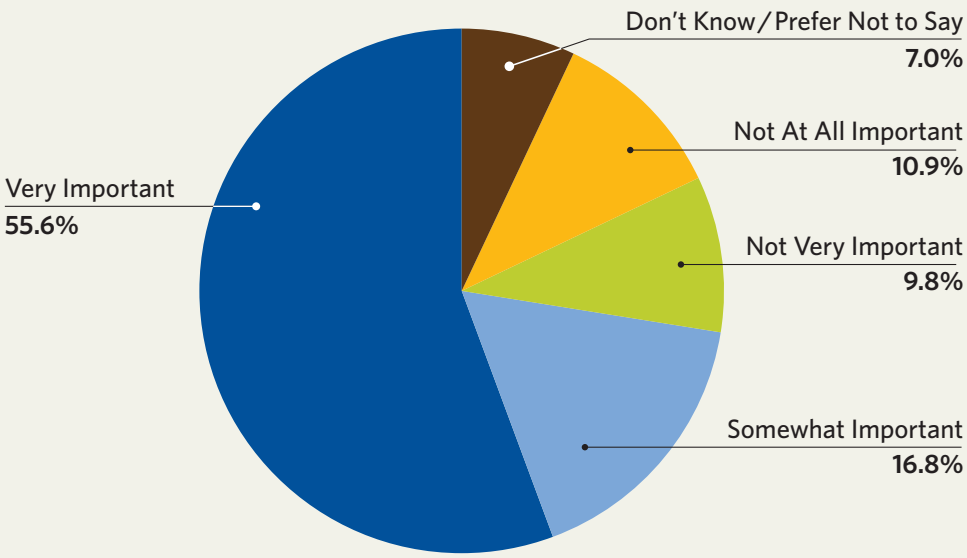


Figure 2.

Importance of Israel as a Jewish State by Politcal Party

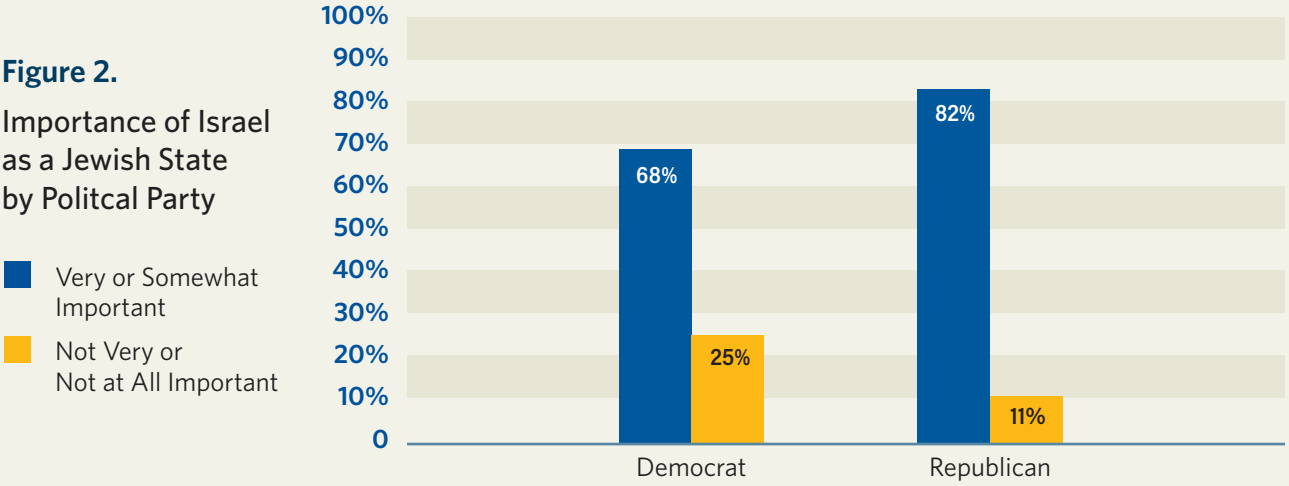


Figure 3.

Importance of Israel as a Jewish State by Denomination

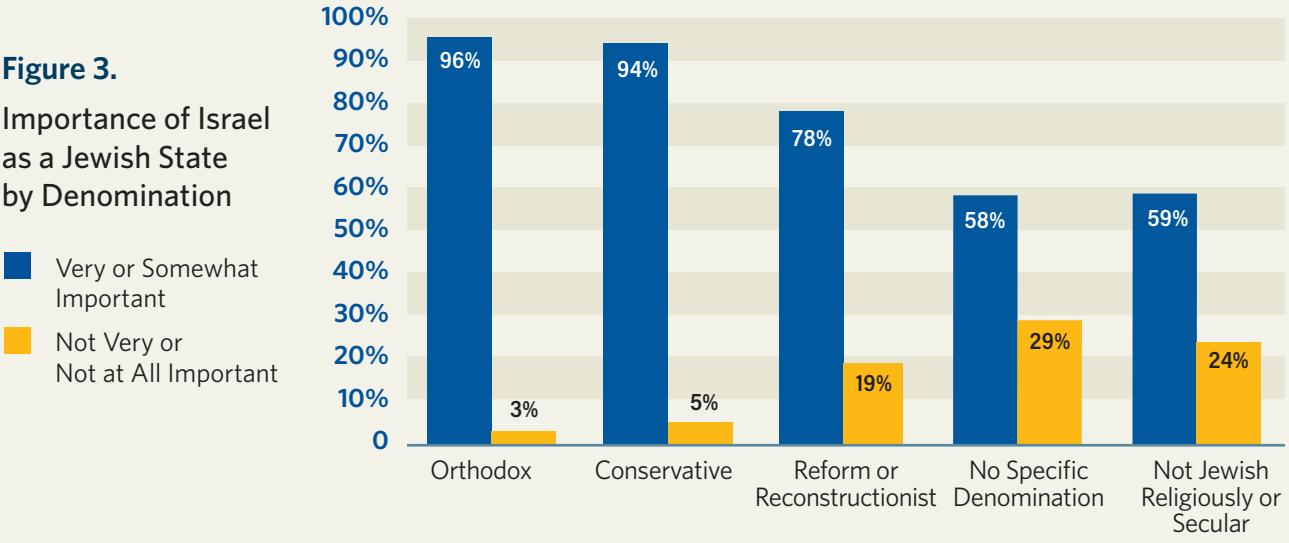
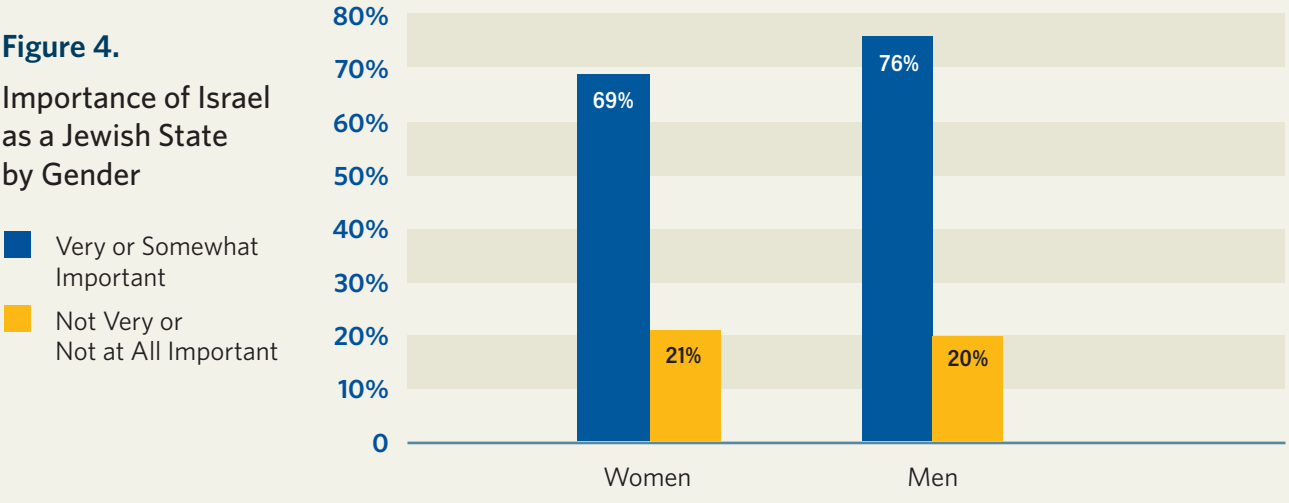


Figure 4.

Importance of Israel as a Jewish State by Gender



religiously Conservative Jews were more supportive than Reform or Reconstructionist Jews, who in turn were more supportive than those who considered themselves not Jewishly religious or secular (Figure 3). There was also an 8-point gender gap, with men expressing more support than women (Figure 4). Support for the concept of Israel as a Jewish state was also associated with higher educational attainment, homeownership, and higher income (Figure 5).

A belief in the importance of Israel as a Jewish state varied by age: 88% for those 70 and above, 85% of those in their 60s, 59% of those in their 30s, and just a bare majority (52%) of those between the ages of 18 and 29 (Figure 6). Among this latter group, almost one-quarter (23%) stated that the idea of Israel existing as a Jewish state is not at all important.

Another question asked directly about Israel and Jewish identity. The survey posed the question: "Tell me how important caring about Israel is to what being Jewish means to you — Is it essential,

Figure 5.

Importance of Israel as a Jewish State by Income

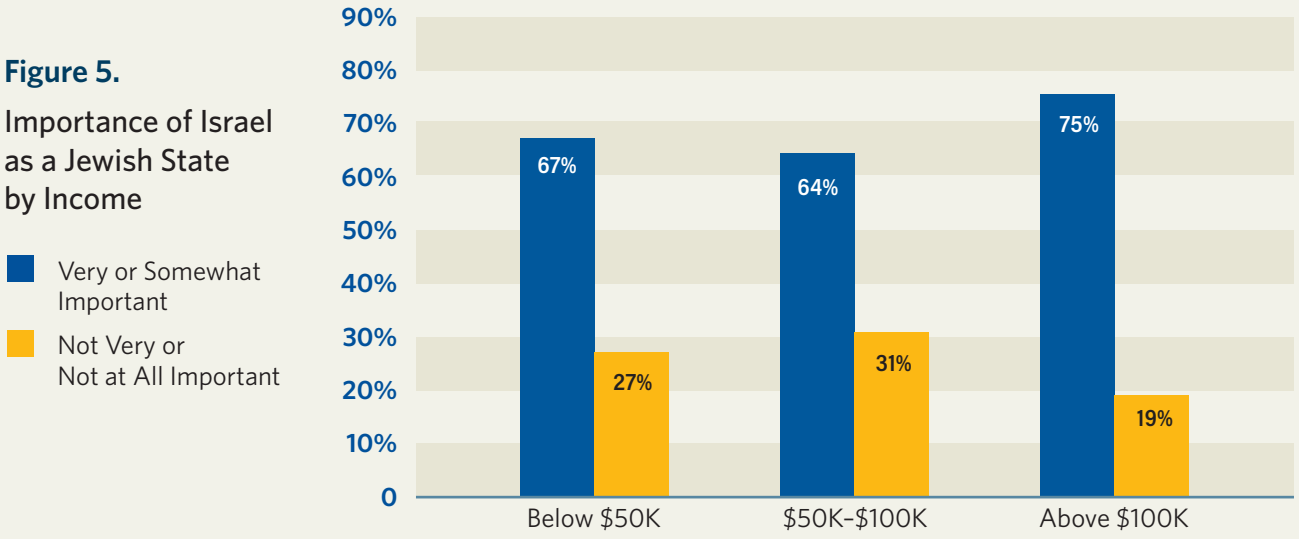


Figure 6.

Importance of Israel as a Jewish State by Age

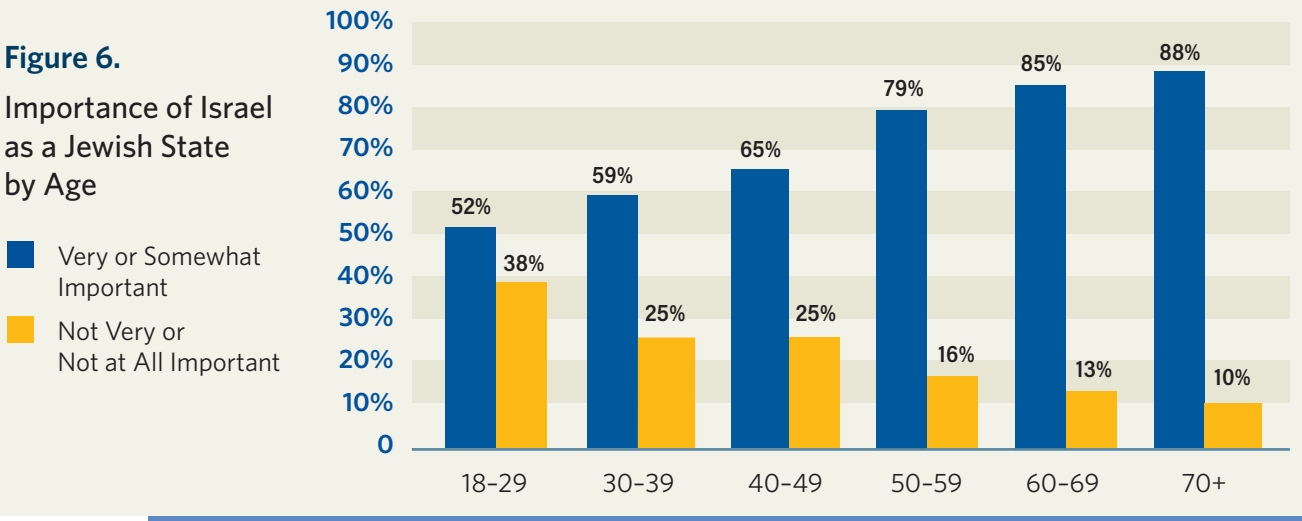
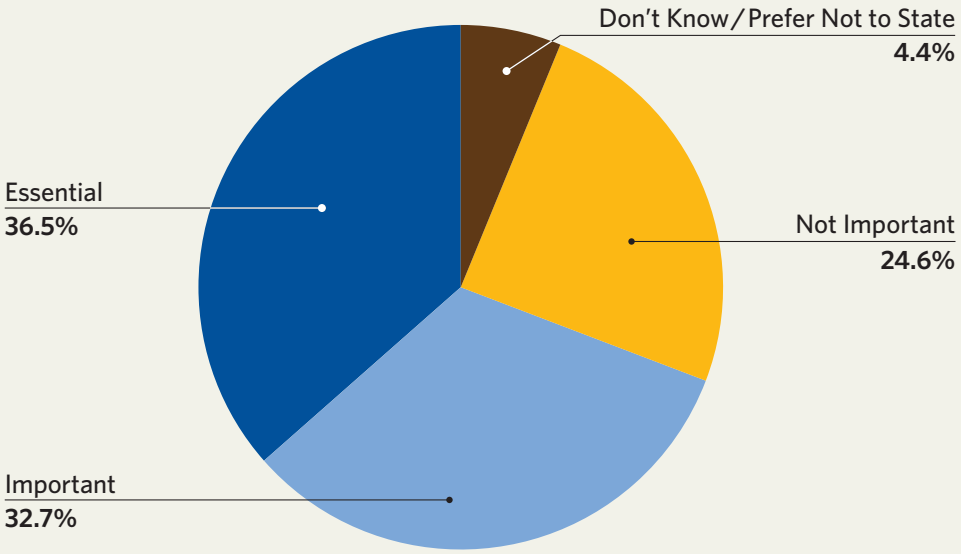


Figure 7.

How Important is Caring About Israel as a Measure of Being Jewish



important but not essential, or is it not an important part of what being Jewish means to you?"

Responses to this question were mostly in line with attitudes about Israel's existence as a Jewish state (Figure 7). However, the results differ noticeably from the Pew Research Center's 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews, which asked the identical question.[2] For example, while 38% of Pew's Democratic respondents considered caring about Israel an essential part of being Jewish, only 26% of Los Angeles County's Jewish Democrats selected that option. While 32% of Pew's 18- to 29-year-olds found it essential, the corresponding figure for PBI was only 19%. This may have to do with the six-year gap between the two surveys, and/or to differences between Jewish voters in Los Angeles and national survey respondents. Another possible cause is difference in survey design, since Pew's survey universe differed slightly from PBI's.

2 Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews, 2013; p. 83.

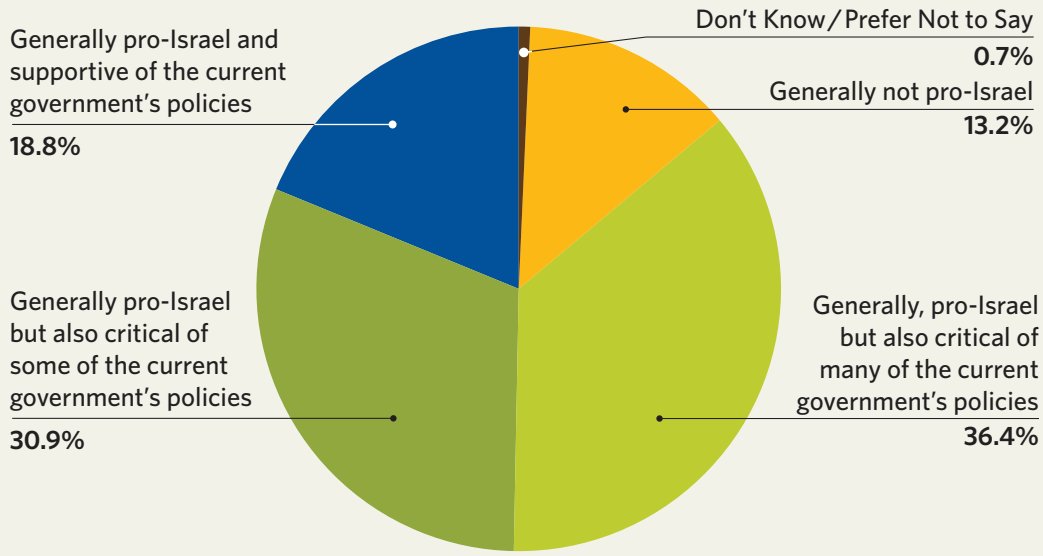
II. Views about Israeli Government Policy

PBI also sought to assess general support for Israel and specific support or criticism of Israeli government policies: "Which of the following statements best describes your opinion about Israel: Are you generally pro-Israel and supportive of the current government's policies; generally pro-Israel, but also critical of some of the current government's policies; generally pro-Israel but also critical of many of the current government's policies, or generally not pro-Israel?" This question was adopted from a 2018 Jewish Electorate Institute (JEI) survey conducted by the Mellman Group, which effectively captured gradations of public opinion towards Israeli government policies.[3]

The overwhelming majority of respondents registered a response (Figure 8). Fewer than one percent of respondents did not know how they felt or preferred not to state. Clearly, the question of support for Israel and the policies of the

3 https://www.jewishelectorateinstitute.org/american-jews-remain-strongly-supportive-of-the-democratic-party/

Figure 8.
Views on Israeli Government Policies



current Israeli government were salient issues among Los Angeles County's Jewish voters.

Altogether, 86% considered themselves generally pro-Israel, and only 13% were generally not pro-Israel. Nineteen percent were generally pro-Israel and supportive of the current government's policies. However, 31% of respondents indicated that while they were generally pro-Israel, they were also critical of *some* of the current government's policies. A somewhat larger contingent (36%) were pro-Israel but also critical of *many* of the current government's policies. Altogether, 67% of Los Angeles County's Jewish voters were generally pro-Israel but also critical of some or many policies of the Israeli government.

This criticism came from a wide variety of subgroups. It included all age levels and all indicia of religious service attendance. It extended to those born in the United States and first-generation Americans. Being generally pro-Israel but critical of some or many policies was associated with higher levels of educational attainment, higher income, and homeownership (Figure 9). The gender gap was even wider here than in the question about Israel as a Jewish state. Men supported the current government's policies by ten points more than women (Figure 10).

Responses to this question were polarized along religious and political lines (Figures 11 and 12). Political conservatives, Republicans, and Orthodox Jews expressed majority support (66%, 52% and 56% respectively) for the current Israeli government's policies. Conversely, liberals, Democrats, and Reform or Reconstructionist Jews expressed criticism of some or many current Israeli government policies by 80%, 81% and 76%, respectively. (According to the survey, political conservatives, Republicans and Orthodox Jews comprised small minorities among Jewish voters in Los Angeles – only 18%, 16% and 3%, respectively.)

Figure 9.

Views on Israeli Government Policies by Educational Attainment

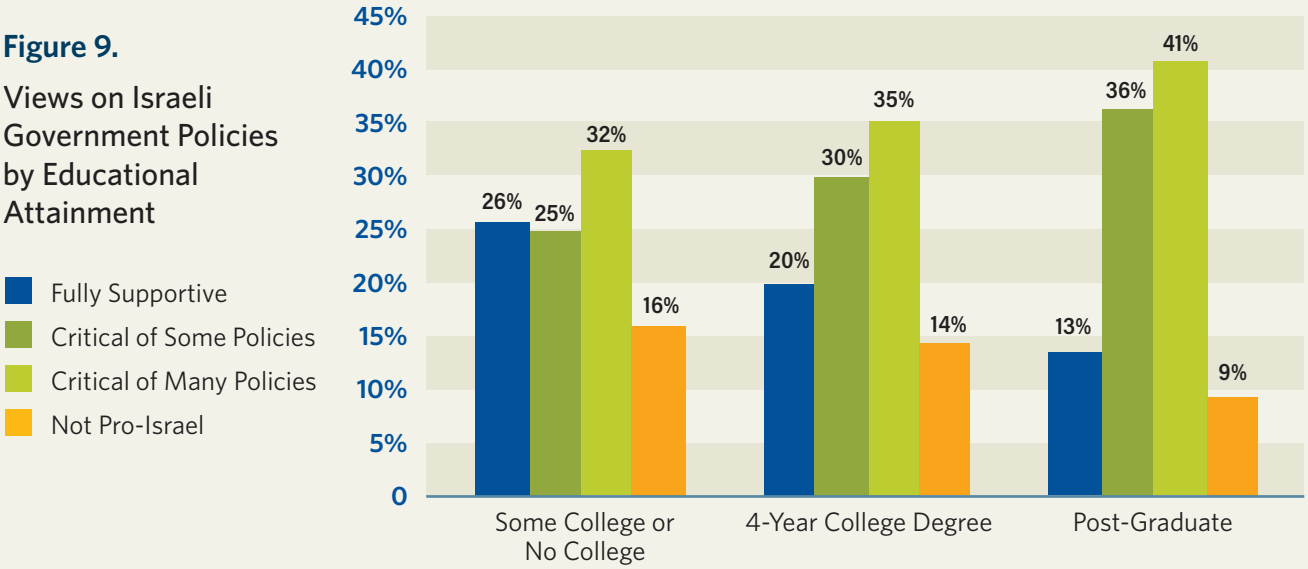


Figure 10.

Views on Israeli Government Policies by Gender

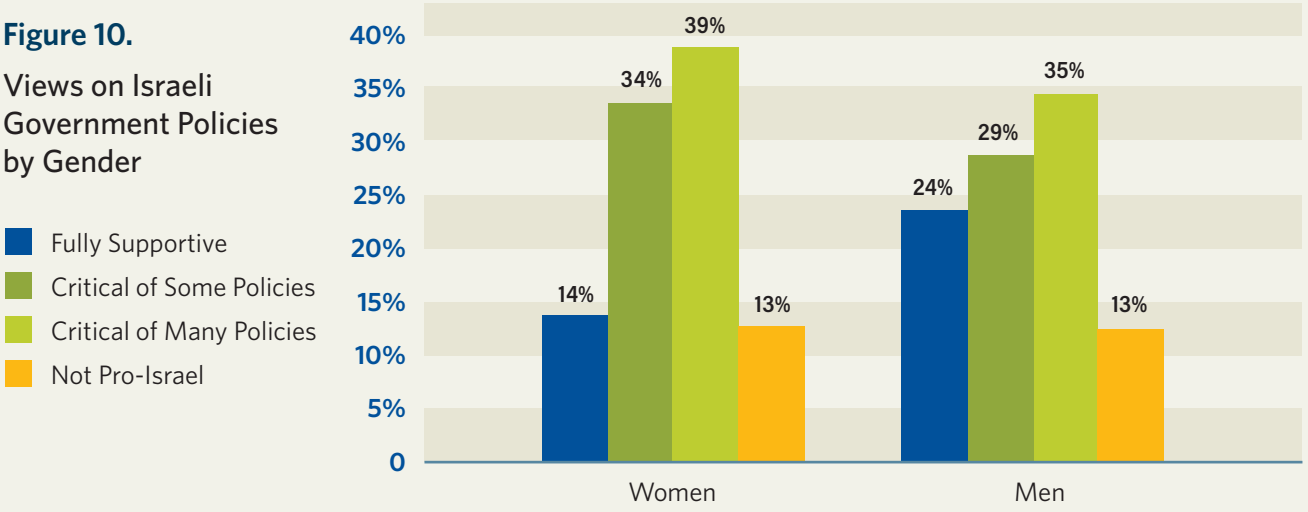


Figure 11.

Views on Israeli Government Policies by Ideology

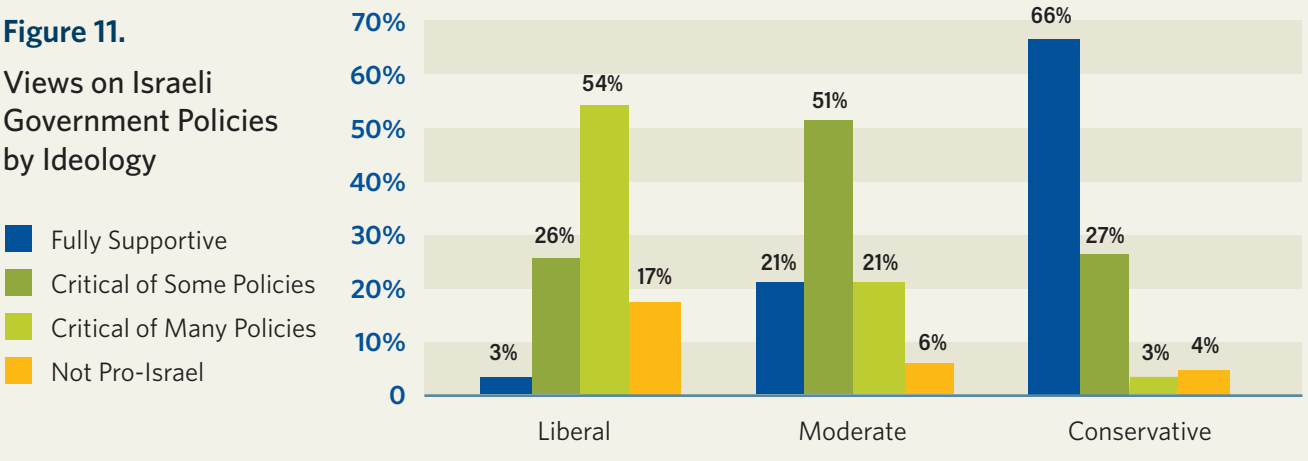


Figure 12.

Views on Israeli Government Policies by Denomination

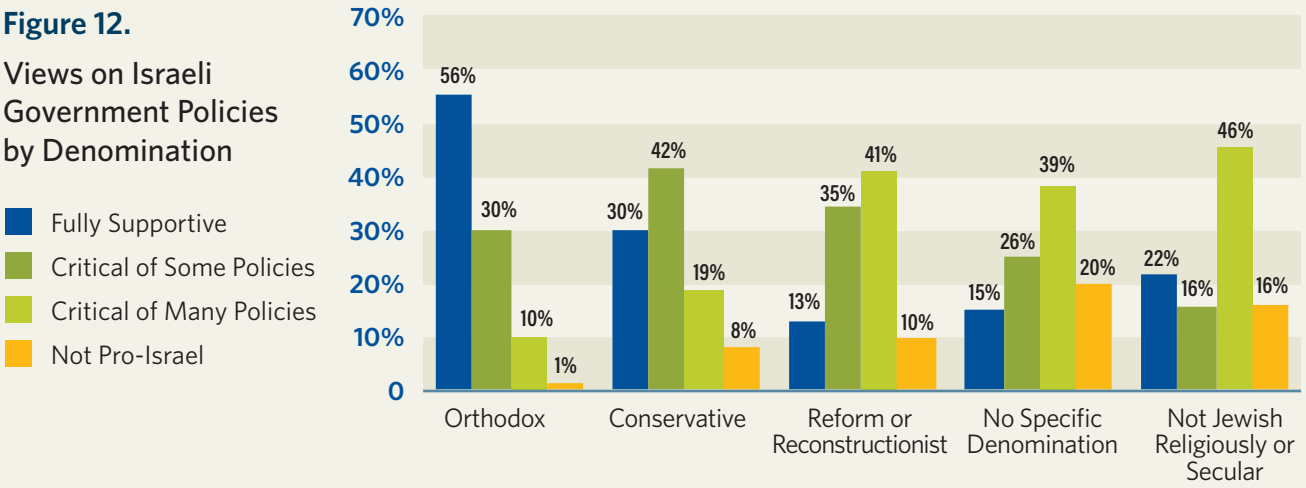
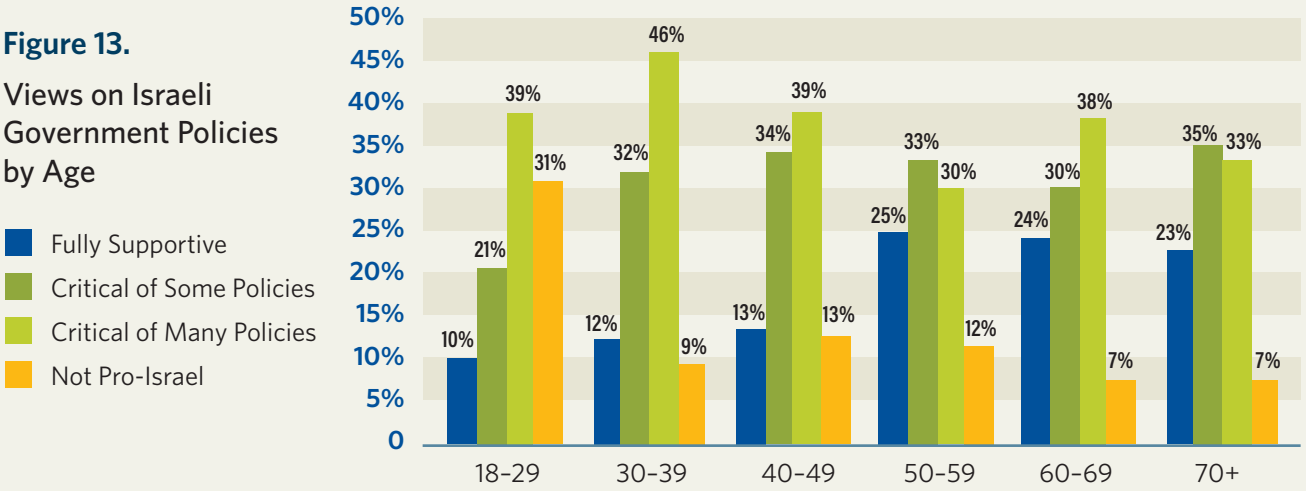


Figure 13.

Views on Israeli Government Policies by Age



While all groups provided majority support for Israel, a considerable minority of the youngest Jews (31%) were generally not pro-Israel (Figure 13). A notable percentage of Latino(a) or Hispanic Jews (26%) as well those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or questioning (22%) also identified as generally not pro-Israel.

As compared with the 2018 Jewish Electorate Institute /Mellman Group survey, the PBI study demonstrated a lower level of support for Israeli government policies and a notably larger share of Jews who pronounced themselves generally not pro-Israel. For example, 32% in the JEI/Mellman study were generally both pro-Israel and supportive of the then-current government's policies, compared to only 19% in the PBI survey. Only 3% in the national study were generally not pro-Israel, compared with 13% in the PBI survey.

III. Jewish Identity and Affiliation

Another question asked survey respondents, "How important is being Jewish in your life?" Thirty-eight percent said that being Jewish is not too important or not at all important in their lives. Among these "low Jewish identity" voters, only 54% considered the existence of Israel as a Jewish state important, compared to 86% among "high Jewish identity" voters (Figure 14). On the question of support for Israel and for the Israeli government's policies, those with "low Jewish identity" were almost twice as likely to be generally not pro-Israel as those with "high Jewish identity" (17% vs. 9%). A plurality of both high-identity and low-identity Jewish voters were critical of many policies of the Israeli government (Figure 15).

A similar pattern emerged when comparing respondents with one Jewish parent to those with two Jewish parents. Among respondents, 54% of those with one Jewish parent thought the existence of Israel as a Jewish state was important, compared to 84% of those with two Jewish parents. Those with one Jewish parent were twice as likely to be generally not pro-Israel as were their counterparts with two Jewish

Figure 14.

Importance of Israel as a Jewish State by Jewish Identity

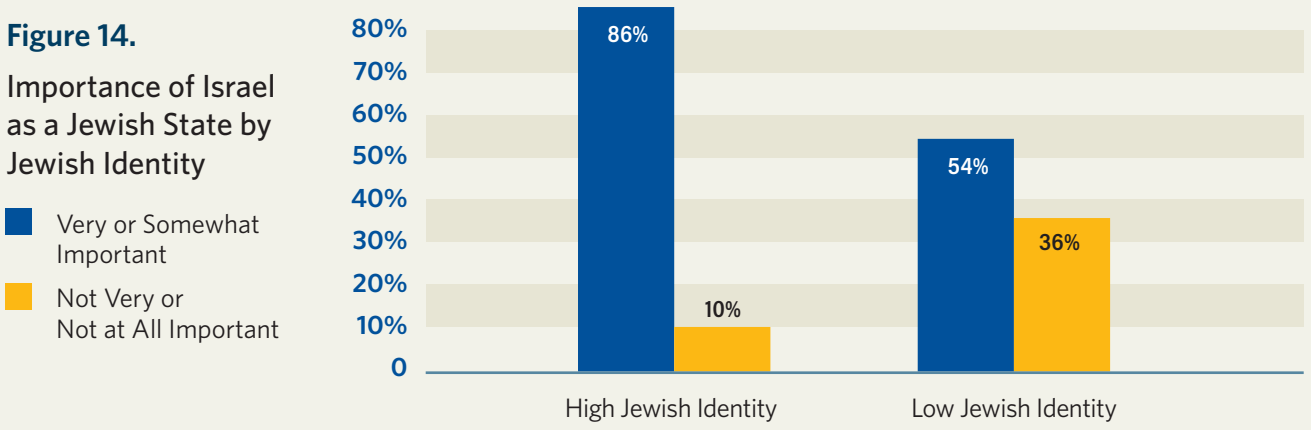
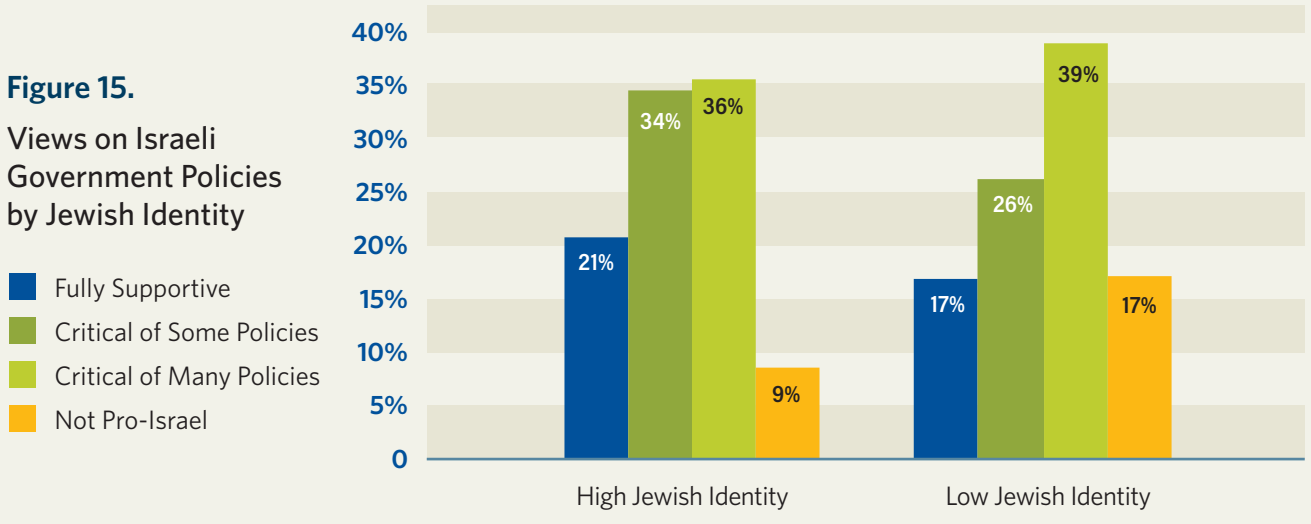


Figure 15.

Views on Israeli Government Policies by Jewish Identity



parents (20% vs. 10%).[4] The plurality (40%) of Jewish voters with one Jewish parent were supportive of Israel but critical of many Israeli government policies, while the plurality of Jewish voters with two Jewish parents (35%) were supportive of Israel but critical of some Israeli government policies.

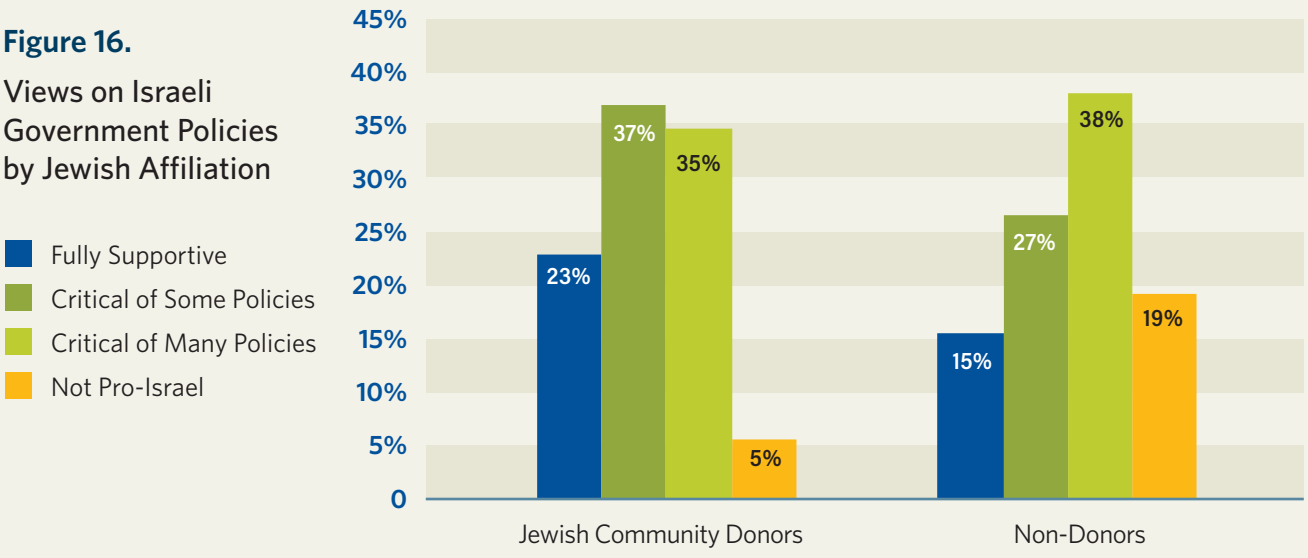
We can also use the PBI survey to differentiate between Jewish voters who associate with Jewish institutions—that is, following Jewish-oriented media, donating to Jewish charities or causes, and belonging to a synagogue (henceforth "affiliated Jews")—and those who do not. According to the survey, affiliated Jews were considerably more likely to be generally pro-Israel and supportive of the current Israeli government's policies, and less likely to be generally not pro-Israel, than non-affiliated Jews (Figure 16). For example, 23% of those who donated to Jewish causes were generally pro-Israel and supportive of the government's policies, compared to 15% of those who did not contribute to Jewish causes. Only 5% of Jewish givers were generally not pro-Israel, compared with 19% of those who did not give. However, large majorities of both groups were critical of some or many of the Israeli government's policies. In fact, those who donated were more critical than those who did not.[5] A similar pattern appeared with synagogue membership and followers of Jewish-oriented media. Overall, more than two-thirds of voters who affiliate with Jewish institutions expressed some or many criticisms of Israeli government policies.

4 Among those with no Jewish parents, 11% identified as "generally not pro-Israel."

5 Among those who donated to Jewish causes, 72% were critical of some or many Israeli government policies. Among those who did not donate, 65% were critical.

Figure 16.

Views on Israeli Government Policies by Jewish Affiliation



IV. Observations and Conclusions

The big picture of the PBI survey is, first, the extraordinary staying power of the idea of Israel. A substantial majority of Los Angeles County's Jewish voters considered it important that Israel exists as a Jewish state. The survey did not explain what it means for Israel to exist as a Jewish state, nor did it ask respondents to define this concept. Such an exploration may be appropriate for future assessments of Jewish opinion. While the vast majority of Los Angeles County's Jewish voters were generally pro-Israel, two-thirds were critical of some or many policies of the Israeli government. Additionally, viewpoints on Israel were polarized along a left/right religious and political axis, and Jews with a lower level of Jewish "identity" and "affiliation" were less attached to Israel.

Finally, the survey showed stark and meaningful differences between younger and older Jewish voters. The PBI survey reveals that the vast majority of Jewish voters who were 40 and older expressed great support for the idea of Israel as a Jewish state and considered themselves pro-Israel, even while criticizing the policies of that state. Younger Jewish voters, however, held different views. Among 18- to 29-year-olds, 39% did not consider the existence of Israel as a Jewish state important, and 31% were generally not pro-Israel. Additionally, 30- to 39-year-olds were the most likely group to identify as generally pro-Israel though critical of some or many policies. Ultimately, the survey demonstrated that younger Jewish voters were less attached to Israel and less likely to support its government policies than their older counterparts. It remains to be seen whether, as this cohort grows older, today's younger Jews will become more attached to Israel or if American Jewish attachment and support for Israel will instead decline.

American Jews' relationship with Israel is under the microscope. The PBI 2019 Jewish Survey examined this issue from the perspective of more than 1,800 Los Angeles County voters broken down by age, political ideology, religious affiliation and many other variables. The survey offers valuable insight into this all-important and frequently sensitive topic and exposes fault lines and challenges for Jewish communal and Israeli institutions going forward. We hope that the data presented here can assist spiritual, educational, political and community thought leaders in developing visions for the future ties between American Jews and the State of Israel.

Acknowledgments

The Pat Brown Institute's Los Angeles County Jewish Voter Survey was supported by the Diane and Guilford Glazer Philanthropies, former State Sen. Alan Sieroty and a number of individual donors.

About the Pat Brown Institute at Cal State LA

The Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs at Cal State LA is a nonpartisan, presidentially chartered institute dedicated to the quest for social justice and equity, enlightened civic engagement, and an enhanced quality of life for all Californians. Former California Governor Pat Brown brought the Institute to Cal State LA in 1987. Today the Institute seeks to sustain his vision and legacy through its current programs, including the Southeast Los Angeles (SELA) Initiative, Civic U©, polling, candidate debates, and community-based research.



PAT BROWN INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Unleashing the Power of Participation

Contact us at PBI@calstatela.edu
www.calstatela.patbrowninstitute.org

@patbrowninstitute
@PBI
@pat_brown_institute